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## Approved For Release 2000/08/11: CIA-RDP96-00792R000700480001-8 $D\ A\ Y\ L\ I\ F\ E\ \cdot S\ P\ O\ R\ T\ S\ \cdot R\ E\ C\ R\ E\ A\ T\ I\ O\ N$

## Ultra-Light Fright Flight

By Mariah Burton Nelson

'M TOO YOUNG to die," said Larry Fox, another Weekend writer. "You

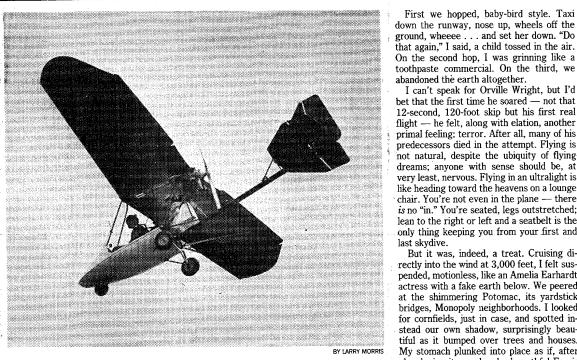
That's how it came about that I flew in a flimsy, open-cockpit aircraft not with normal trepidation, but with death on my mind.

Before liftoff I talked with Bruce Peters, owner of Washington Sky Sports, a company specializing in tiny, dragonfly-shaped aircraft called Spectrum Ultralights. Peters has 12 years of piloting experience, he assured me. Even if the engine goes out, the plane can safely glide down. It can land in a cornfield. "You're in for a treat," he prom-

The day of liftoff we drove to a short runway behind a southern Maryland trailer park. I wore my aviator shades and my closest approximation of a flight jacket; Bruce wore normal clothes. After Bruce's preflight inspection, I did my own. Much to my horror, I saw plane parts fastened with bungee cords, zippers and duct tape. ("Non-essential parts," Bruce explained.) Made of Dacron, the wings were sewn in the zig-zag stitch I used to use in home ec. Maybe it's me, but I find it difficult to trust an airplane constructed on a Singer.

To make matters worse, Peters, a dimple-cheeked man with the springy step of a Muppet, is only 25 years old - which, since that's younger than I am, is very young. Turns out his 12 years of experience began on a hang glider at age 13. For the past six years he's been performing loops, stalls, and wingovers in Stearman biplanes in Bealton's Flying Circus. My fate was in the hands of a kid who gets his jollies flying upside down.

"Today is a good day to die for all the things in my life are present," said fraw Horse, which was very evolved of him, but one is daily hemmed in by death, disease thouse, which was very evolved of him, but one is daily hemmed in by death, disease thouse, which was very evolved of him, but one is daily hemmed in by death, disease thouse the control of the control when it came to the possibility of my exchanding life for one airborne thrill today



Bruce Peters in an open-cockpit ultra-light plane.

longer in my reckless teens or roaring twenties, I have noticed that the more intensely I love life, the less romantic I feel about an early death.

Yet I can't play it safe just because cautious colleagues and homemade airplanes petrify me. "I don't need to fly because fly-

ing doesn't frighten me; I need to fly even though it frightens me," writes Diane Ackerman in On Extended Wings, the saga of

her flying lessons. "To me, real courage . . . has to do with keeping one's passion for life intact, one's curiosity at full stretch, when

it was as good a day to die as any. Also I trusted Bruce. On the way to the

in my left, and the pedals under my feet all

plate: Vader 1) carefully and confidently, even slowing to the required 5 mph through the trailer park. He spoke with knowledge and humility - a rare combination at any age - about weather patterns and the

physics of flight. Before I knew it I was strapped into the dragonfly, head protected by a helmet ("If we crash, should I DAYLIFE try to land on my head?"), con-

trol stick between my knees. In front of me was a motorcycle-sized windshield; behind me was Bruce, now elevated

to the status of savior. "You've got controls back there, too, right?" I squeaked into the Chargian 96:300792R0007004800 (washington sky sports offers introductory for \$1,200, which includes an unlimited number of lessons. Ultralights are sold for \$4,900 to \$15,000. Contact

wheel rides, I finally caught up with it. Bruce showed me how to turn the plane and how to keep it level. After a while he

First we hopped, baby-bird style. Taxi

that again," I said, a child tossed in the air.

toothpaste commercial. On the third, we

bet that the first time he soared - not that

12-second, 120-foot skip but his first real

predecessors died in the attempt. Flying is

not natural, despite the ubiquity of flying

dreams; anyone with sense should be, at

very least, nervous. Flying in an ultralight is

like heading toward the heavens on a lounge

chair. You're not even in the plane - there

is no "in." You're seated, legs outstretched;

lean to the right or left and a seatbelt is the

only thing keeping you from your first and

But it was, indeed, a treat, Cruising directly into the wind at 3,000 feet, I felt sus-

pended, motionless, like an Amelia Earhardt

actress with a fake earth below. We peered

at the shimmering Potomac, its yardstick

bridges, Monopoly neighborhoods. I looked

for cornfields, just in case, and spotted in-

stead our own shadow, surprisingly beau-

tiful as it bumped over trees and houses.

My stomach plunked into place as if, after abandoning it on a hundred youthful Ferris

I can't speak for Orville Wright, but I'd

abandoned the earth altogether.

put his hands on my shoulders. "Congratulations," he said. "You've been flying the plane for a full minute.'

last skydive.

"Don't you dare have a heart attack," I answered.

The truth is, I like to be scared, though I prefer having been scared. So when we touched down, returning to the conspicuously flat two-dimensional world, I was all smiley again — scared silly — and grateful for another risk taken and survived.